

Promoting Success of Multilevel ESL Classes: What Teachers and Administrators Can Do

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Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both learners who are native English speakers and those whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn the skills needed to earn high school equivalency certificates or to achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL) or ABE classes to improve their oral and written skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for the following audiences:

- Practitioners—teachers, teacher trainers, and program administrators—who work with adult English language learners in ESL classes
- Educational researchers focusing on instruction for adult English language learners

Background

Because learners in all adult ESL classes have varying levels of competence in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, every class can be considered multilevel to some degree (Bell, 2004; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). For many programs, however, the term *multilevel* has come to define classes where learners from a wide range of levels, from beginning to advanced, are placed together in a single group. In some parts of the country, multilevel classes are the only option that programs have when offering ESL classes. Multilevel classes can present challenges to teachers, who must engage the interest of all the learners in their classes while helping them achieve their diverse educational goals. Multilevel classes can also present challenges for administrators, who must provide appropriate and adequate support for teachers. This brief provides background information on multilevel classes and offers suggestions for teachers on instruction in such classes and for administrators on ways to provide support for teachers in programs with multilevel classes.

Context for Multilevel Classes

Despite the efforts of many programs to provide courses that meet the needs of all learners and to refine their student placement procedures, multilevel classes continue to play a role in the adult ESL educational system. Small, often rural, programs may find it necessary to place learners of different levels in a single class in order to serve small numbers of students. Adult refugee programs, often mandated to serve all refugees who sign up whether or not there is space in an appropriate class, may also need to place students in multilevel classes (Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center, 2002) as may programs in which there is a large increase in student numbers over a short period of time.

Significant demographic shifts are creating a need for ESL classes in a growing number of states. According to data from the 2000 census, the decade between 1990 and 2000 saw a rapid arrival of immigrants to new states and communities. During this decade, the foreign-born population grew by 145% in the new-growth states, compared to only 57% nationwide. The largely labor-driven migration has brought immigrants into states that form a broad band across the middle of the country. Many of these states had not seen much immigration growth in over a century (Urban Institute, 2002). During the 1990s, the immigrant population more than doubled in 19 states, with the highest growth occurring in Arkansas, Georgia, Nevada, and North Carolina. Other states that have seen a rapid increase include Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, Nebraska, Tennessee, and Utah (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Until they grow to a size that can support a sequence of classes with students at similar levels, programs may need to form multilevel classes.

Challenges of Multilevel Classes

Multilevel classes can provide opportunities for learners. Those with limited proficiency have an opportunity to interact with more proficient English speakers, and advanced learners benefit by using their English skills to help lower level students negotiate meaning. Students in multilevel classes can learn to work together across differ-

ences and develop learning communities in which members learn from one another's strengths (Corley, 2005; Hofer & Larson, 1997; Jacobson, 2000; Wright, 1999).

At the same time, addressing the diverse needs of a multilevel class presents challenges for the teacher and requires (a) training, experience, and extra time for preparing lessons and materials; (b) teacher collaboration; and (c) program support. Lesson planning and classroom management, while time-consuming, are essential elements of a successful multilevel class. If the instructor plans activities that meet only the needs of learners whose skills fall in the middle, those learners with lower skills may become frustrated, and those with more advanced skills may become bored (Boyd & Boyd, 1989; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Multilevel lesson planning must include strategies for organizing group, pair, and individual work. Whether or not a class is multilevel, there are several factors that teachers need to take into consideration when grouping learners in pairs or small groups:

- **Level of literacy and education in the native language.** Students with native language literacy skills can learn to transfer their knowledge to learning English literacy. These students may progress faster than students without that foundation in the first language.
- **Language level in English.** Students with lower language skills and those who are generally less vocal may naturally segregate themselves from the more outspoken or advanced-level students. This prevents the quiet or lower level students from getting the extra help they may need and that which the more advanced students might provide.
- **Age.** Young adults (16–18) differ socially and cognitively from older adults. Although adolescents tend to progress more quickly in their language learning, they also need more structure, guidance, and support to stay motivated (Weber, 2004; Young, 2005). Senior learners also have unique concerns that need to be taken into consideration, such as issues of physical health or hearing and visual acuity (Grognet, 1997).
- **Culture.** Cultural norms and conflicts can have a powerful impact on classroom learning and dynamics. While cross-cultural exchange is mainly a positive aspect of diverse classes, teachers must be aware of the dynamics rooted in ethnic conflicts among various groups, social status tensions (e.g., rural vs. urban), and gender oppression (e.g., women not attending because of husbands' restrictions; Horsman, 2000; Isserlis, 2000).

Instructional Strategies for Multilevel Classes

Teachers can do the following to promote success in their multilevel classes:

- **Needs assessment.** Teachers must determine what each learner needs and wants to learn. Ongoing needs assessments may include standardized tests and alternative assessments, one-on-one interviews with learners, group discussions, and learner observations (Alexander, 1993; Holt, 1995; Isserlis, 2000; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). The needs assessment process allows students to express their individual needs and provides teachers with data that can help them adjust the content of the class to meet student needs. (For more information on adult ESL student needs and needs assessments, see Emmenecker, 2003; Ng, 2002; Wonacott, 2000.)
- **Lesson planning.** Teachers can prepare parallel lessons for learners at different levels. Planning should include strategies for managing a variety of group, pair, and individual activities (Shank & Terrill, 1995).
- **Grouping strategies and purposes.** Grouping strategies are essential in a well-run multilevel class. Teachers should determine when whole-group activities, small-group activities, pair work, and individual work are appropriate. In addition, teachers should determine when it is best to place learners in heterogeneous groups (i.e., learners with disparate skills or varying ages or from different cultural groups) and when it is best to place learners in homogeneous groups (i.e., learners with similar skills, similar ages, or from similar cultural groups; Shank & Terrill, 1995). Another basis by which teachers may group students is their preferred ways of learning. Teachers can draw on *multiple intelligence theory* to understand the different ways their students learn and demonstrate proficiency, and group the students accordingly (Kallenbach & Viens, 2002; for an overview of multiple intelligence theory and how it can be applied to adult ESL classes, see Christison & Kennedy, 1999.)
- **Using native languages.** In mixed-level classes, less advanced students might fall behind if only the second language is used (Schmidt, 1995). When possible, teachers may use learners' native language to clarify instructions so that all students remain engaged. Additionally, teachers may ask one student to help another student who speaks the same language so that students can negotiate meaning together (Condelli, Wrigley, Yoon, Cronen, & Seburn, 2003; Wrigley, 2003).
- **Project-based learning and thematic instruction.** In project-based learning, learners are presented with a

problem to solve or a product to develop. For example, learners may create a handbook of community resources, or they may interview employers and create a list of qualities they look for in employees. Learners working in pairs or teams can develop skills needed to plan, organize, negotiate, and arrive at a consensus. Even learners at beginning levels are able to develop these skills, as they can benefit from the collaborative nature of team work (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998; Wrigley, 1998; Yogman & Kaylani, 1996). Projects can be organized around themes, such as civic responsibility, children's education, or languages and cultures of the United States. Students can then work in groups based on their interests rather than their English proficiency levels. Teachers may use this approach, known as *thematic instruction*, to unify a multilevel class (Balliro, 1997; Bell, 2004). When designing project-based learning activities and when grouping students in the classroom, teachers can draw on cooperative learning approaches. Several recent research studies with adult English language learners have noted the benefits of cooperative learning when working with students in the workplace (Gerdes & Wilberschied, 2003), with nonnative English speaking community college students (Chaves, 2003), and with English language learners in undergraduate programs (Ronesi, 2003; Storch, 2005).

- **Using self-access materials.** Teachers can keep a collection of self-access materials in their classrooms so that students can select materials and work individually. Self-access materials should include activities from all skill areas and levels, and each task should be set up so that learners need minimal, if any, assistance from the teacher to accomplish the task. (See Shank & Terrill, 1995, for a discussion on ways to use self-access materials.)

Administrator Support for Programs With Multilevel Classes

Faced with the challenges of managing a multilevel class, teachers need support from program administrators in order to successfully serve the learners in their classes. The following recommendations can help administrators make informed decisions about how best to support the teachers in their programs. While it may not be possible to implement all of the recommendations, they can serve as guidelines for program improvement and for deciding whether to limit the size of a program.

1. Carefully consider program design options.

Consider the financial limitations of the program, the number of learners the program serves, instructors' levels

of experience, and the program's access to volunteers and tutors. These factors will help determine the need for multilevel classes and the program's ability to serve learners well through multilevel classes. Conducting a needs assessment during registration provides valuable information. Some of this information can be used to determine, for example, whether classes that are mixed in terms of language level might be organized along the basis of shared topics of interest or themes.

2. Consider staffing and assignments.

Instructors: Multilevel classes need to be staffed by experienced teachers (Shank & Terrill, 1995) but benefit from the additional support of tutors and teacher aides.

Tutors/aides: Tutors can be helpful in working with small groups in a multilevel class. It is preferable, however, to have an experienced teacher work with very beginning-level students (Shank & Terrill, 1995).

Counselors: Programs should consider offering counseling services to help students understand and navigate the different education options available to them. Counselors can assist students in setting goals for their education and developing plans to achieve those goals. Ideally, multilingual counselors who reflect the various languages and cultures represented in the student body would be selected. Growing evidence of the value and need for such services is emerging from the ongoing Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning, which is investigating the literacy development and learning and life experiences of adults with limited education (S. Reder, personal communication, March 2006).

3. Communicate explicitly with students.

Recruitment: Before learners enroll in the program, explain the multilevel nature of the classes. This will help avoid problems later, such as frustration a student may experience when placed with students at a much lower English language proficiency level or embarrassment at being in a class with more advanced learners. Some students may choose not to enroll in a multilevel class. A study of adult Latina students in New York found that some students cited multilevel classes as a factor that deterred them from studying English (Buttaro, 2002). Being open with students about the nature of the classes and making clear to them the extra measures being taken to manage these classes can help students make informed decisions that will be in their best interest.

Intake: Provide as much multilingual support as possible during intake so that the program's mission, services, and procedures are clear to all students. Use the students' native languages to do a thorough needs assessment that gath-

ers the information needed to make effective placement decisions.

Orientation: Provide a student orientation that includes discussion of learner purposes and goals and some practice in setting short- and long-term goals; interviews with current students, discussion of barriers to learner participation and ways to address those barriers; review of study skills, reflection on past learning experiences and discussion of how these classes will be the same or different; and consideration of the roles and responsibilities of adult learners (Yogman & Kaylani, 1996).

Counseling: Offer educational and career counseling in the students' native languages. Provide frequent and systematic opportunities for learners to give their ideas about the program and its effectiveness in meeting their needs. Develop a good referral system so that students are aware of their options for English language courses (Balliro, 1997).

Instruction: Encourage teachers to talk with students directly about the multilevel nature of the class, acknowledging the context and inviting students to give ongoing feedback about their experiences in the class (Balliro, 1997).

4. Provide professional development and other support for teachers.

Administrators should familiarize themselves with the challenges of teaching multilevel classes so that they can offer appropriate support to teachers. Planning and teaching multilevel classes places a burden on the teacher, who must dedicate extra time to class preparation and extra effort to classroom management. For guidelines on developing lesson plans for adult ESL classes, see *Practitioner Toolkit: Working With Adult English Language Learners* (www.cal.org/caela/tools/program_development/CombinedFiles1.pdf). Administrators can support teachers in a variety of ways:

Planning time: Provide additional paid time for teachers to plan lessons and develop materials. Provide opportunities for teachers to visit each other's classes, to plan together, and to discuss teaching strategies.

Materials: Support teachers in developing a shared bank of materials with activities for different levels (Balliro, 1997; Wrigley, 2003). Encourage more use of student-generated and authentic materials and less reliance on textbooks written by level (Condelli et al., 2003; Jacobson, Degener, & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Wrigley, 2003).

Professional development opportunities: Provide professional development on instructional strategies for multilevel classes, such as those listed above.

Conclusion

Because of financial challenges, geographic context, or number of students, multilevel classes are necessary in some adult ESL programs. While such classes can enhance students' English language learning experiences, teachers and administrators need to be aware of the special challenges they can pose. Teachers face challenges in class preparation and classroom management. Administrators must be prepared to take measures to address these challenges and support teachers with appropriate pay, time to plan and collaborate with each other, and opportunities for professional development. Administrators can explore ways to provide additional resources for students, such as orientations and tutors or counselors who speak the students' native languages. Combined with these measures, administrators can encourage the building of relationships among students based on extracurricular interests or workplace and family related needs. Finally, administrators need to ensure that teachers are knowledgeable about strategies that are effective in multilevel classes. If properly managed, the multilevel classroom can provide a positive learning experience for everyone.

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